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SUBJECT: RENEWED CATHOLIC CHURCH PROTESTS AT THAI HA PARISH

REF: HANOI 0160

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Catholic parishioners have been gathering again over the last three weeks at Thai Ha parish in Hanoi to protest construction work on a disputed plot of land adjacent to the church. Large prayer vigils had initially taken place in January and February, before the Tet Lunar New Year holiday (reftel), and then diminished. The prayer vigils restarted again on March 23 and grew, culminating in an April 7 vigil of some 1,000 demonstrators and an ultimatum to disband by local Hanoi authorities. Thai Ha church officials have declined to speak with us for the time being, but local media report that so far there have been no clashes between demonstrators and law enforcement units. Currently, the demonstrations have mostly disbanded; however, two large tents remain at the site and parishioners are gathering to demonstrate in smaller numbers before and after daily masses. The local government has ordered the priest in charge of the church to present himself to the People's Committee of Dong Da District in Hanoi to face charges that the church and its parishioners are flouting the committee's ultimatum to halt the demonstrations and sit-ins. End summary.

2. (SBU) Thai Ha's Catholic congregants seek the return of property confiscated by the GVN and have been demonstrating at the site, in downtown Hanoi, off and on since January 2008 (reftel). Post contacts within the Archdiocese of Hanoi's office said that parishioners began gathering on March 23 when construction work began on the land the Church argues it owns. The GVN had previously confiscated the land and sold it to a private company. The private company, in turn, sold off smaller parcels of the land to private individuals to construct residences. Although construction of a factory on the site ceased in January 2008, construction reportedly began again on the site in late March, sparking "hundreds" of people to gather in protest. So far there have been no clashes between demonstrators and law enforcement units.

3. (SBU) Local state-sanctioned media report that Catholic demonstrators are occupying state-owned land, gathering and praying illegally in public areas, illegally erecting crucifixes and icons of the Virgin Mary, and disturbing public order. The New Hanoi newspaper accused the protesters of taking advantage of religious freedom to stir up protests against the government, while online Catholic news services warn that "the hostile media coverage has increased fears among the demonstrators that a police crackdown is imminent."

4. (SBU) According to Hanoi Moi Newspaper (the official mouthpiece of the Hanoi People's Committee) and Hanoi Television and Radio, local protesters started to gather at the site on March 23. On April 6, the People's Committee of Dong Da district in Hanoi issued a decision to impose administrative punishments against local protesters who were accused of illegally occupy public property. On the same day, the local People's Committee issued an ultimatum to

halt the demonstrations and sit-ins before noon of April 7. District and precinct officials reportedly reached out to the protesters at the site, asking them to comply with the decisions. When Emboffs visited the protest site on April 16, it appeared the bulk of the demonstrators had disbanded; however, two large tents remain and Catholic Church officials tell us a "few demonstrators" are still spending the night. In addition, parishioners are rallying for fixed periods of time before and after daily masses.

15. (SBU) The Archdiocese of Hanoi confirmed to us that the local government has ordered the priest in charge at Thai Ha parish, Father Vu Khoi Phung, to present himself to the People's Committee of Dong Da District to face charges that the church and its parishioners are flouting the committee's ultimatum to halt the demonstrations and sit-ins. We understand Father Phung is currently in HCMC. While tensions remain high at the disputed site, a police crackdown does not appear imminent.

MICHALAK